

# North Coast leaders welcome return of tourism

By **KATIE FRANKOWICZ**  
The Astorian

North Coast leaders have a very different message to send to tourists than they did last spring.

“We feel like we’re ready for spring break,” Seaside Mayor Jay Barber said. “We’re inviting people to come to Seaside.”

When spring break vacationers descended last March to escape coronavirus-related shutdowns in their own cities and take advantage of sunny weather at the beach, residents were alarmed.

City and county leaders quickly adopted emergency orders to temporarily ban visitors from hotels and campgrounds. Seaside — hit hard by both the state’s shutdown measures, but also the influx of tourists — restricted access to city parks and beaches as well. Cannon Beach sought to exclude even daytrippers. They echoed Gov. Kate Brown’s message to “Stay Home, Stay Healthy.”

In Seaside, one resident was more direct. He held up a handmade sign that simply read, “Go home.”

Now there are signs that cities are ready to welcome tourists back.

The Astoria Downtown Historic District Association hired a new community outreach officer whose duties include parking enforcement as traffic picks up again. Astoria’s leaders have relaxed rules on sidewalk dining, as well as for parklets, which allow restaurants and bars to expand outdoor seating into street-side parking spots.

In Cannon Beach, the City Council recently gave city staff the go-ahead to work with businesses interested in using parking spots in front of their buildings for outdoor seating. The city has already allowed restaurants and bars with their own parking lots to set up tables in those lots.

In Seaside, the city has eased some parking standards to allow for outdoor tables and tents.

Many businesses are still reeling and suffering, but David Reid, the executive director for the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, believes the North Coast economy has entered into a recovery phase.

Precautionary measures like wearing masks and social distancing are now normal. Though some people continue to push back, in general, businesses and communities are no longer educating people about these requirements.

“I think we can say we are ready for tourists,” Reid said. “We know how to operate our businesses safely — and our clientele, our visitors, know how to visit safely.”

## Tourism

But businesses said they also need flexibility in how they accommodate visitors.

MacGregor’s, a restaurant and whiskey bar in Cannon Beach, asked city leaders to allow them to set up outdoor seating in three parking spots outside of the business. With ever-changing capacity guidelines for indoor seating and no parking lot or deck available, owners Holly and Chip MacGregor faced significant revenue shortfalls and few options for boosting business if they couldn’t also provide outdoor seating.

Under state guidelines, restaurants in Clatsop County can only seat up to 25% of their capacity but also must maintain distances between tables. In smaller buildings, some businesses may not even be able to reach the 25% capacity allowance.

The MacGregors feel the city’s decision could have come months earlier. Still, they are glad to have a little bit of insurance, though Holly MacGregor feels the benefits may be pretty equal



Broadway and Holladay Drive in Seaside.

R.J. Marx

to the harm at this point.

She is concerned about taking away parking options from potential customers in a city already infamous for parking woes. Besides, she noted, outdoor seating on the coast often means contending with the cold, the wet and the wind. She will need to have staff for the extra tables and find tents that don’t blow away.

Though the number of reported coronavirus cases is dropping and people are receiving vaccinations, there is no way to predict what the landscape will be like in the spring or summer — or what restrictions will be in place.

In anticipation of continued restrictions, Sarah Lu Heath, the executive director of Astoria’s downtown association, hopes to plan other types of experiences for visitors, perhaps outdoor exhibits or installations instead of events.

Both Heath and Reid know the tourist months this year will continue to be very different for visitors and visited alike.

“I don’t think anybody has the illusion that they’re going to come here and have

the same experience they had pre-pandemic,” Reid said.

While many tourism-based businesses have suffered, in many ways, tourism never really left the coast, noted Todd Montgomery, who leads the hospitality management program at Oregon State University-Cascades in Bend.

Even as virus cases soared across the state and public health officials urged people to limit unnecessary travel, visitors continued to flock to the coast on sunny days well into the fall and winter months. The coast provided attractive options for outdoor recreation as, increasingly, everything else was closed.

The Oregon Coast Visitors Association saw fewer national and international travelers, but more Oregonians who came to the coast for overnight stays or on daytrips.

Visitation was not evenly distributed. Instead, it seemed “patchy and somewhat unpredictable,” said Marcus Hinz, the executive director of the visitors association.

In September, Seaside saw an increase in quarterly lodging tax revenue collected over the prior year. Meanwhile, Astoria reported a decrease of about 12% from July through December compared to the same period in 2019.

Last year’s visits came with challenges, too — challenges that will likely persist as industry leaders predict pent-up demand for travel and recreation will result in a busy summer this year.

Last year, state parks on the coast saw huge numbers of people arrive. They often left behind piles of trash on beaches and trails.

The visitors association also saw an increase in the number of people seeking out licenses and permits for hunting, fishing and camping for the first time. To Hinz, that indicated that “we need to try harder than ever to insert messages about etiquette and expectations into any communications they receive.”

Instead of the inspirational marketing of the past, Hinz said the visitors association is focused on emphasizing instructional mes-

saging about how to visit responsibly.

“We know visitors are coming and all we can really do is manage the situation,” he said.

## Challenge

For businesses, one challenge with the return of tourism will be the ability to remain adaptable.

Montgomery believes times of disruption can open the door to great opportunities, but many tourism-based businesses on the coast are still recovering from significant setbacks.

The businesses that survived into 2021 have already had to adapt — many times over. Restaurants turned to takeout. Hotels, bars and restaurants adopted technology to streamline their processes and reduce labor costs. Then they had to stay agile, pivoting quickly with shifting rules and guidelines.

They will need to continue to be nimble, Montgomery said.

He is struck by how differently people have responded to the pandemic. Some longed for indoor dining and when it was offered again, they dove back in without hesitation. For other people, indoor dining continues to feel too risky.

Businesses will need to accommodate this fragmented customer base, perhaps for a long time to come, Montgomery said.

Then there is the labor pool to consider.

Preliminary research conducted through Oregon State shows a high number of workers in the hospitality and travel sectors are not seeking out jobs in those industries. They were discouraged by how their employers responded to the coronavirus and, in some cases, failed to protect workers.

These sectors struggled with a labor shortage even before the pandemic.

Now, Montgomery said, “I think the labor market just got harder.”

# Retired county public health director steps in as interim director

By **NICOLE BALES**  
The Astorian

Margo Lulich, a former Clatsop County public health director, stepped in as interim director on Monday while the county conducts a search to replace Michael McNickle.

The Daily World in Aberdeen reported last month that McNickle accepted a job as director of Grays Harbor County Public Health and Social Services in Washington state. He will start on March 15, according to the newspaper.

The news came as a surprise to county leaders. McNickle has declined to comment on his departure. The county said McNickle’s last day is Friday.

Lulich was hired by the county as a public health



Margo Lulich at a refugee camp in Bangladesh.

tion Service District until 2017.

Most recently, she held a contract position as executive director of Hawai’i Keiki with the University of Hawaii School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene.

Lulich has served as a humanitarian response nurse for nearly 20 years for Medical Teams International of Portland and did tours in Africa, Asia and Europe.

“Cannon Beach and Clatsop County are home to me,” she said in a statement. “I look forward to supporting public health and working with community partners to ensure a smooth transition while continuing an effective response to the pandemic.”

The county said it plans to launch a search for a permanent replacement for McNickle shortly.

“So incredibly fortunate to have Margo Lulich in our community and able to step in and lead our Clatsop County Public Health Department,” Mark Kujala, the chairman of the county Board of Commissioners, said in a Facebook post.

“She has a distinguished career in health care and made an impact in humanitarian causes across the globe. Her experience and leadership will be a huge asset to our county team.”

The Public Health Department has 25 staffers

and an annual budget of \$4.1 million. The department provides a range of services and programs, including maternal and child health, immunizations, reproductive health, communicable disease response and environmental health.

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